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Graduation Proposal

Context

Vitangelo Moscarda is the protagonist of 'One, No one and One Hundred Thousand', a novel by Luigi Pirandello; his story begins when one morning he wakes up and his wife points out that his nose bends a little to the right. Mr Moscarda comes to realize that the image that he has of himself does not correspond to what other people see of him, that he has no control over how others see him: he freaks out. The only way to regain control is to completely destroy his personality and carefully build one that suits his liking. It is the beginning of his new life.

Inspired by Pirandello's story I started comparing Moscarda's crave for the perfect identity to our contemporary obsession for control over what we share. The analogy seemed obvious.

In my thesis and with my Graduation Project I'd like to research the topic of Online Performance with a focus on Confessional Culture: the performance of advertising what is private, write about feelings and opinions on blogs, share pictures, videos and micro-experiences, peek into the life of friends and strangers.

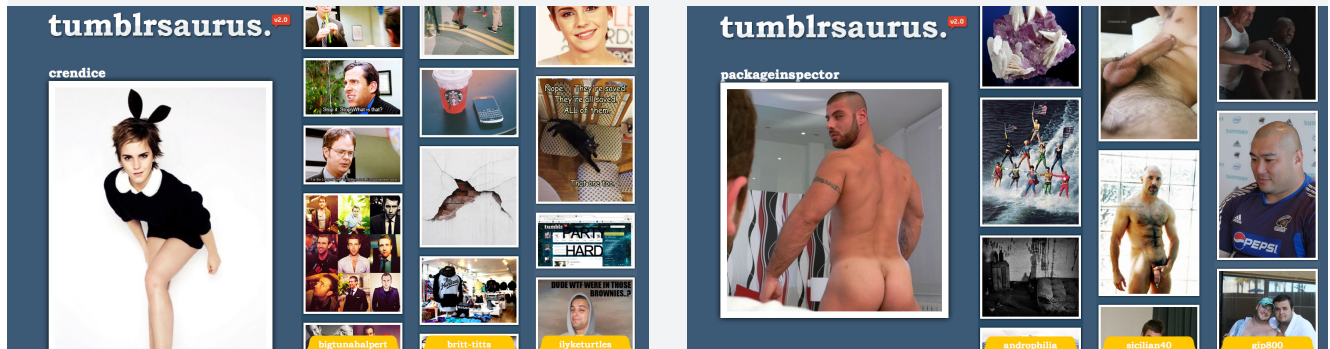
My idea is to make an interactive installation that explores the relation between private and public viewing of a video.

I will take snippets of YouTube videoblogs as a source material and in relation to the number of spectators, different kind of content will be explored in the resulting projection.

Relation to previous practice

In my previous practice I've been fascinated by the role of the community in everyday online interactions: the community as a support for possible political change, or communities that unite people with similar interests. Here I'll illustrate a couple of my earlier projects that I think relate to my current practice.

Tumblrsaurus2



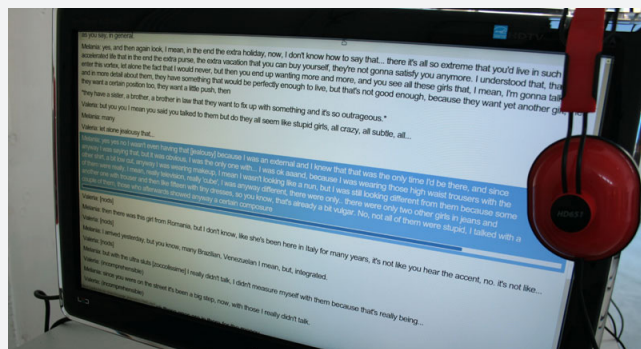
Tumblrsaurus2 is a web application, it allows to visually represent the relationship between a given user and the users with whom he has interacted the most. Typing a username results in a visualization of the last ten pictures he submitted and the last ten pictures of his 'most similar users'.

The scale of the interaction is measured through the shared items in the collections of two users; likewise, the more they have in common the higher the probability that the rest of their collection is similar.

Before starting the project I argued that similar users would probably have similar collections, that there would be a similar underlying 'feeling' to the elements they share, which might not necessarily be the topic or the object portrayed, but more something that has to do with the colours and the 'style' of the image. The project was constructed in a way that could visually show that similarity at a glance.

The focus in my fascination lied in the distance between what software thinks it's similar, and what does a user think it's a nice addition to his collection; in other words: How much of that process can be automated?

Repetita Iuvant



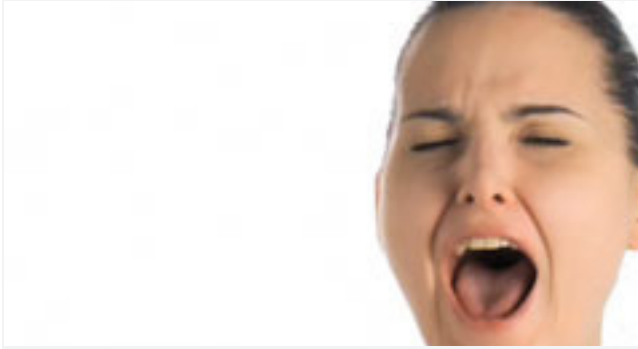
Repetita Iuvant is an interactive installation: it consists of two computers on a desk. One computer is dedicated to the playback of this conversation, which is audible in Italian, although it is possible to have subtitles. The topic of the conversation is a party that girl A attended, as it turned out to be not quite what she was expecting, she calls girl B and tells her all about it.

The second computer allows to select a passage of that conversation and reenact it, speaking into a microphone. Some of the expressions that Girl A uses in describing the scene compose the list of sentences that it is possible to reenact, once a passage of the conversation is selected, the user is prompted to reenact it; the voice of the user is then mixed on top of the actress' and then uploaded to the server.

Several months before starting the project I found online 400 pages of telephone taps transcripts, linked to Berlusconi's 'Ruby Gate' Case. What I found most interesting was a conversation between a girl (around my age) and her best friend, the night after one of Berlusconi's infamous parties. She is not the typical guest, as she was convinced that it would have been a 'fancy dinner with the prime minister', and she is shocked by what she just saw happening around her; so much so that, once back home, she calls her best friend and tells her all about it.

The strong moral judgement she has on the matter, and the disgust she expresses telling the story appeared to me like a more universal experience: I decided to give the opportunity to re-speak her voice and her words in order for it to be heard, for it to matter.

Reacting to the Audience - SSGR³



SSGR³, my BA Graduation Project, was an interactive video installation: a single spectator is inside a cube-shaped room; the walls surrounding him are screens displaying a portrait of a person.

The closer the viewer gets to the projection the more violent becomes the reaction of the projection and of the soundscape: the sound circles faster and faster through the eight speakers and the person portrayed in the video screams and shakes louder and violently. This creates a sense of restlessness and anxiety.

In this project my goal was to infuse a sense of inner turmoil, as a critique to the almost non-existent reaction generated by the violent scenes present in everyday media.

Inspiration / Related Projects

Listening Post (2001) Mark Hansen & Ben Rubin



Listening post is an Installation that selects fragments of texts from on-line conversations and displays them on a grid of hundreds of small screens; a text-to-speech synthesizer reads them aloud.

From chat rooms, bulletin boards and forums, the texts are disconnected from their natural on-screen medium; the simultaneous display of all these statements and experiences gives a sense of the overwhelming magnitude of the real-time communication.

Match of the Day(2004) Geert Mul



An image-recognition software, every day, takes stills from international satellite television channels; the Artist selects one pair per day, from the images the software deemed similar, and shows them on the website of the project.

I Love Alaska(2006) Lernert Engelberts & Sander Plug



In august 2006 three months worth of search queries of 650,000 AOL users were leaked on the Internet.

The artists chose to tell the story of user #711391, a middle-aged woman from Texas looking online for answers to her problems, dreaming of a new life in Alaska.

Methodology

What I find fascinating about these projects is that, although they all use preexisting data - that being text or software-generated information - there is clearly editorial minds behind it and that generates an meaningful output. Given a set of data, the hand of the artist is necessary to make the connections that the machine can't see, may it be the order in which snippets of text are displayed or the juxtaposition of images and sound.

I would like to work in a similar way.

Online Performance and Storytelling

I have always been an avid fiction reader, and from time to time fiction writer, I like the idea of playing with the possibilities that software and code offer in the construction of a story, the themes I'm interested are the performance of appearances and the yearning for a new, better life.

Observing the way people perform online, I came across the idea of building a narrative out of their experiences, both with automation tools, such as language processing or image comparison, and with my personal mediation.

The Path to Illumination

In the past months I tried to approach the subject of Online Performance in different ways: I tried tweeting everything I did for a day



zwartlaura Laura Zwart

At home now, I can't say if I feel could or hot

30 Nov



zwartlaura Laura Zwart

So the shop was closed, and luckily M is gonna buy the gift for me tomorrow :(

30 Nov

but it didn't really bring me anywhere.

I tried to examine unhappiness as a drive for possible change, scraping online services for What Would People Rather Do or Rather Be

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I'd rather be with you. say you want the same thing too #imissyou
I'd rather be with you, but you are not around. so imma call somebody up and see if they be c
I'd rather be with you but you're never around.... so ima call somebody up and see if they wo
I'd rather be hanging out with my bf.
I'd rather be active. i'm not tryna be another statistic of yet another lazy nigga. lol
I'd rather be alone #np
I'd rather be alone #fucklove
I'd rather be with my sister or dallas. sorry dude.
I'd rather be home making music.. but i have to sit here with this one hour lag waiting for m
I'd rather be but we're stuck where we are , and its so hard, its so far. this long distance
I'd rather be with youuuuu but you are not around
I'd rather be than man signing the rapper's checks then be the rapper..
I'd rather be just friends'
I'd rather be with somebody special. then have bees on my dick '
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The results I had, in this case, the detail and the frequency of blog posts and status updates, left me literally no space to fill in with fiction. I found myself trying to build a narrative where too much information was already given. I then realized that the projects I referenced, and of whom I admired the storytelling technique, belonged to a time where such a density of material was not the custom, and therefore it was still possible to develop a story based on the sparse elements given.

A great source of inspiration for me, from then on, has been the practice of online confession: social networks and video-sharing websites offer a unique platform for the confessional behaviour modelled by reality TV shows.

As of this moment such video material seems to be the ideal source for me to work in creation of a narrative.

an Interactive Installation

In a sudden epiphany I envisioned an installation: a video is projected in a room, a collage/mashup of videos taken (or streamed) from YouTube.

As a first step I began developing a prototype with manual time-based annotation of videos to make thematic “rough cuts” of different kinds of online (YouTube) content. Sample keywords being: family, friends, sex, confession, sexual orientation, attempted suicide, drugs, (more to come); these are just a few of the topics discussed.

During these initial stages of my prototype, Active Archives [<http://pzwart3.wdka.hro.nl/aa>] has proved a powerful tool to start annotating videos and linking them together.

I plan to sketch possible algorithms for how the number of viewers translates into different clips.

In the first hypothesis of scenario: while there is no one watching, the video shows an idle scene, pieces of video in which a person stares at the camera, waiting for an audience; as soon as people appear in front of the installation, the video gradually changes into scenes in which the vlogger is revealing more and more intimate details about their life; the level of intimacy of the confessions/revelations is directly dependent on the number of spectators and - possibly - activity (movement) of the audience.

Another possible scenario plays with the sense of intimacy of a conversation: some videos, especially confessions, were conceived by their creators to be watched in solitude, in front of a computer screen; those are videos that seek a one to one connection with the spectator. In this context it is possible that the same content, viewed in a group, would generate a different reaction.

Furthermore, other kinds of exhibitionistic videos, considerably less intimate, were made for a larger public of -possibly recurrent- followers.

In this scenario, while there's few (or no) people watching, the conversation is concentrated on intimate and moving subjects, the more people approach the screen the more mundane the topics will become.

Response to the Inspiration

In relation to the projects that inspired me, or use a similar technique I feel a clarification is needed.

As much as I admire how Listening Post, or the documentary Because we are Visual, approach the subject of online sharing, I have the feeling they end up doing something like glorifying the noble uniqueness of the user. It all goes back to the rhetoric the article, from Time Magazine, where “you” was awarded person of the year (Time Magazine, 2006), and the feeling that each one of us is connected, all of our ordinary lives are meaningful stories worth telling publicly.

On the other hand, I admire the concern towards over sharing of data- I am aware of the connections between the culture of sharing and the commercial interests of the companies that provide online sharing services. Regardless of the fact that this matter is going to constitute an important part of my thesis, I am not sure how much of it is going to be visible in the project.

I like the idea of there being a deep connection between what people deliberately share, the intimacy they unveil, and their audience / what is at stake for each of them.

My goal for this installation is exploring the distinctive language of video-blogs, generate an output that uncovers their similarities, hopefully encourage the discussion on the self-inflicted erosion of personal privacy and need to expose ourselves to others so prevalent in online culture today.

References

Grossman, Lev: You – Yes, You – Are TIME’s Person of the Year. Time Magazine, [online]. Available at: <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html>> [Accessed 07 december 2011].

Biblio/Videography

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- * Alfred Hitchcock - North by Northwest
- * Tom Mc Carthy - Remainder
- * Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin - Listening Post
- * Kim ki Duk - Time
- * Geert Mul - Match of the Day
- * Lernert & Sander - I Love Alaska
- * Philip K. Dick - Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said
- * Ondi Timoner - We Live in Public
- * Laurie Ouellette & James Hay - Better Living through Reality TV
- * David Shields - Reality Hunger: A Manifesto
- * Jon McKenzie - Performe or Else
- * Olivia Rochette & Gerard-Jan Claes - Because We Are Visual
- * Erving Goffman - The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life